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Climbing the employability mountain

Tristram Hooley, head of research at iCeGS, presents the findings of a first-of-its-kind literature review of employability research in UK higher education providers between 2012 and 2016

There is a mountain of research published every year about graduate employment and employability. My colleagues and I devoted a substantial chunk of 2016 to climbing this mountain by trying to read everything written on this subject between 2012 and 2016 (see Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017). This article sets out some of the key findings of the review.

One of the first challenges that we faced was to define employability. This proved to be more difficult than anticipated. The definition of employability continues to be contested, to shift in relation to policies and to be understood differently by different stakeholders. A key issue is how far employability is a distinct concept from employment. In other words, is it possible to be employable but still unemployed?

We drew on the HEA's (2013) employability framework to create a common definition which defined employability broadly. This definition clarified that employability is about more than obtaining employment. It is also about the personal qualities that individuals need to build positive careers and to participate in society.

The politics of employability

Our review found that there was a lively debate about the politics of employability. Key arguments made by this literature include:

- the size and structure of the graduate labour market means that increasing graduates' employability will not necessarily lead to enhanced employment opportunities. The number of graduates is not necessarily closely aligned to the number of graduate jobs
- employability is key to the public policy rationale for higher education
- in a marketised higher education system, employability is likely to be a key motivator for student choice making
- employability can be viewed through a range of different lenses related to the needs of different stakeholders (government, employers, students, universities, etc.)

Some writers have been critical of the 'employability agenda'. Their reasons for taking a critical stance vary but include arguing that employability:

- is poorly defined
- reduces the space for academic integrity and autonomy
- asks universities to take on a responsibility for vocational training which is more appropriately situated with employers
- is an ideological tool which is used to justify the status quo and induct students into the capitalist hegemony
- only reflects the needs of employers (often filtered through policymakers and universities) and ignores the needs of students and graduates
- plays into a discourse of the student as a consumer of higher education.

While there's some merit in some of these critiques, it's possible to contest the way that they define employability. The broader definition that we took in this review allows more space for critical conceptions of employability that move beyond just satisfying what employers or policy makers want. In this way, it's in line with those critical writers who argue that educators need to inhabit the employability agenda and imbue it with more radical and critical content.

Practice in supporting employability development

The review found a substantial literature that looked at the practice and impact associated with employability. The literature we reviewed suggested that there are a range of patterns in the ways that universities deliver employability provision. This research emphasises the importance of:

- Embedding employability in the curriculum and ensuring that students are able to make a connection between employability outcomes and their discipline.
- Providing a range of co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for students to enhance their employability.
- Building links with the labour market and encouraging students to do the same. The literature finds value in a wide range of connections between HEPs and employers. In particular, there's evidence of the impact of providing students with real connections to employers and actual experience of the labour market.
- Supporting students to increase their confidence, self-belief and self-efficacy through their studies.
- Encouraging reflection and increasing students' capacity to articulate and communicate their learning to employers.
- Encouraging student mobility and fostering a global perspective.
- Using institutional career guidance services as organising and co-ordinating structures for HEPs' employability strategies.

Such findings represent the best evidence we currently have about what works in higher education employability provision. However, we also highlight the need to build the evidence base around these kinds of interventions.

We then go on to look at how higher education providers respond to the employability agenda at the institutional level. The literature suggests that most universities actively seek to address employability and to signal their commitment to it to policy makers, employers, students and their parents. Many higher education providers are actively creating strategies, frameworks and other kinds of institutional narratives that set out how they plan to address employability. These include:

- Changing the structure of the institution to make it more effective in delivering employability. This might include changes to staffing, resourcing, curriculum and institutional mission.

- Changing the programme mix to focus on programmes and qualifications which have a strong vocational focus, include placement years or increased employer involvement.
- Developing the curriculum, for example by introducing employability modules or employability elements within existing modules.
- Strengthening extra-curricular provision to provide students with opportunities to develop their employability outside of the core curriculum and developing employability focused co-curricular provision which complements or extends this curriculum.
- Involving external stakeholders, such as employers, in the development of the institution, or programmes and of student employability.

From skills to identity

The literature also includes an interesting discussion on the nature of graduate attributes, employability skills, and/or career management skills. Considerable effort has been devoted to developing lists of skills and attributes that graduates should be encouraged to develop. For the most part, such lists move considerably beyond lists of what graduates should know (knowledge) and be able to do (skills), and include a wide range of personal attributes and characteristics.

Not everyone is happy to view the process of graduate transition as a process of skills acquisition, however. There's an interesting body of literature which seeks to frame graduate transition around the idea of identity. Research that uses this perspective is often influenced by Bourdieu (for example, 1986, 1990) and employs ideas about 'habitus' (the way in which individuals internalise cultural norms) and capital (the social, cultural and economic resources that individuals possess). In such an analysis, the question becomes not simply about encouraging the acquisition of skills, but rather in helping students to transition from the identity of a student towards that of a graduate worker. This perspective also recognises that not all students arrive in higher education with equal levels of employability, nor with equal capacity to make a smooth and successful transition to a graduate identity. Issues of class, race, gender and other equality strands intersect with employability development and frame the way in which graduate identities emerge.

THE BROADER DEFINITION WE TOOK IN THIS REVIEW ALLOWS MORE SPACE FOR CRITICAL CONCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY

The interest in graduate identity seems to me to be a promising line of enquiry for further research on graduate employability. The idea that when students are participating in university and moving into their first job they are doing something more than just building up piles of skills and masses of knowledge makes a lot of sense. Such a perspective enables us to open up both psychological questions about how individuals feel about themselves and sociological questions about how they relate to social structures and makes for a fertile way of thinking about employability. At present, however, there has been little consideration of what the practical implications of this position would be for universities or careers professionals.

Conclusions and reflections

Our review also revealed a lively academic field around the employability agenda. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines are wrestling with the nature of employability, its political implications, the ways in which it is delivered and the relative efficacy of each. There is not much evidence, however, that an inter-disciplinary conversation is taking place. Much of the work on employability is being conducted within disciplinary silos. This leads inevitably to duplication and missed opportunities to build on findings elsewhere. There's a need to improve inter-disciplinary dialogue on employability and I hope our literature review can play a role in this.

The employability agenda offers huge opportunities for universities, academics and students. If broadly conceived, employability offers the opportunity to help individuals to realise their potential, to enhance their skills, attitudes, attributes and knowledge, to become successful workers and citizens, and through this to increase the political legitimacy of higher education. Research, such as the papers examined in our review, can play a valuable role in helping to realise this vision by acting as critical friend, adviser and explorer of new ideas.

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